

France: What is Jean-Luc Mélenchon's May 5 protest?

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The May 5 protest called by Left Front (FdG) leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon against Socialist Party (PS) President François Hollande's austerity policies poses basic questions of class perspective.

A class gulf separates the explosive anger and opposition to austerity that is building in the working class across Europe from figures like Mélenchon. A former PS senator who supported Hollande in last year's election despite Hollande's austerity program, Mélenchon aims to block a movement of the working class against the PS and divert opposition to Hollande into harmless channels.

He promotes illusions that, by backing protests called by pseudo-left parties like the FdG or the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), the working class can shift Hollande's policies while leaving him in power. This takes the crudest form with Mélenchon's proposals to become Hollande's prime minister and, with some institutional tinkering, create a new Sixth Republic. He has stressed that it is "not my intention" to "force François Hollande out before the end of his term."

Hollande feels no political pressure from forces like Mélenchon, who, as Hollande well knows, support his government and its pro-business policies. Since Mélenchon called the May 5 protest, in fact, the PS and the unions have proceeded to announce the closure of the PSA auto plant in Aulnay, and PS Social Affairs Minister Marisol Touraine has unveiled plans for pension cuts.

Only a struggle to mobilize the entire working class in revolutionary struggle offers a way out of the abyss facing world capitalism. Symbolic one-day protests called by union bureaucracies and bourgeois "left" parties across Europe since the outbreak of the world capitalist crisis in 2008 have produced only defeats and social retrogression.

The European Union (EU) and governments of all political colorations have proven impervious to popular appeals, pushing through devastating austerity policies negotiated with the unions. Since 2008, Greece's economy has shrunk by over 20 percent, while industrial production in Italy has fallen by one quarter. With unemployment at 27 percent in Greece and Spain, and nearly 60 percent for youth, Europe's economy is collapsing on a scale not seen since the Great Depression and World War II.

Since his election last year, Hollande's poll ratings have plummeted to record lows as his policies set France on a path to the type of socio-economic disintegration suffered by Greece.

The class interests driving the policy of European governments and their pseudo-left allies were spelled out by EU Commissioner Maria Damanaki this March, amid the Cypriot financial crisis. She said, "The strategy of the European Commission over the past year and a half or two has been to reduce the labour costs in all European countries in order to improve the competitiveness of European companies over the rivals from Eastern Europe and Asia."

The objective conditions are emerging for an explosion of revolutionary working class struggles, as in Egypt in 2011, together with the objective necessity of the working class turning to socialist policies in France and internationally in the face of a terminal crisis of capitalism. Such struggles entail a politically independent struggle of the working class against the pseudo-left parties and the union bureaucracies, which supported Hollande's campaign and his pro-business policies.

Mélenchon and the NPA even admitted that Hollande would carry out austerity—Mélenchon mocked him as "Hollandréou," like pro-austerity Greek premier

George Papandreou—but called for a Hollande vote nonetheless. Since then, the FdG, the NPA, and the union officialdom have continued to support Hollande, abstaining from organizing even token protests against his austerity policies until the May 5 protest.

In the coming industrial and political struggles of the working class, these forces will line up on the other side of the barricades. Across Europe, they have already supported or announced purely “symbolic” opposition to the mobilization of riot police or the armed forces to crush industrial action, such as the French oil strike and the strikes of Greek truckers and Spanish air traffic controllers in 2010, and the strike of Athens subway workers this year.

Mélenchon and his allies live in mortal fear of a movement of the working class that would erupt from below, outside of their control and against their class interests. As Mélenchon recently said of debates over austerity policies championed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, “I fear that the clash [with Merkel] would not take place between reasonable people, but that it could start from below, in which case everything would be lost.”

Even Mélenchon’s empty, demagogic calls to “take a broom” to the institutions of the French Republic were too much for his allies in the FdG. French Communist Party National Secretary Pierre Laurent fussed that “this is not the time to divide, oppose, and sicken people,” while FdG leader Christian Piquet (formerly of the NPA) scolded Mélenchon for using an expression that “hardens the tone to the point of confusing the political perspective.”

Piquet does not want to “harden the tone” against the French Republic because he knows that if the working class swept away the French bourgeois state he and his party would be swept away with it. That is precisely what Mélenchon’s May 5 protest call aims to avoid.

Yet that is the political significance of the global economic crisis that has erupted and is now in its fifth year. Protest demonstrations—even those mobilizing large numbers of workers or obtaining partial satisfaction on one or other demand—will not reverse the death agony of capitalism. The full industrial power of the working class must be mobilized, and a political party built in struggle against the pseudo-left parties, to organize the working class and saturate it with the consciousness that only a socialist struggle for power

offers a way forward.

Workers must build a political party on Trotskyist, that is to say, revolutionary Marxist, principles, fighting for an end to the capitalist system. The International Committee of the Fourth International asks workers, intellectuals, and youth in France to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and fight to build a section of the ICFI in France.



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